



Rare Books: Their Influence on the Library World

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SINCE 1940 AT LEAST NINETEEN major research libraries have added a rare book collection of some kind to their administrative framework. In some cases this has been an entirely new development. In others it has meant the regrouping and redefining of already existing special collections. In light of these facts, it is particularly interesting to note that the indexes of the *A.L.A. Bulletin* for the past forty-five years have only three minor entries under "rare books." This is not meant to imply that the subject has been ignored in library literature. What it does seem to mean is that the official publication of the principal professional library organization has not considered rare books important enough to merit discussion. This author does not propose to find fault for this neglect. Instead it is intended to bring into focus some of the forces which brought the present rare book concept into existence. The role rare books have played in the recent history of American libraries will be described, both as in association with the formal library profession and as independent of it. Finally, in view of the present impact of rare books on library administration and operation, some suggestions for the future will be offered.

The term "rare books" and "rare book collections" will be used here to include the whole realm of rare book research libraries, special collections, and rare book collections. Each institution has its own idea of what is meant or implied by the term it chooses to use. A survey conducted by the author showed policies ranging all the way from the segregation of "high spot" rarities to all inclusive special collections containing all library storage problems. For this article it is sufficient that the concept has enough meaning to devote an issue of *Library Trends* to the subject.

The rare book library concept has taken three principal forms among

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American libraries. The first is to be found among the subscription or society libraries which managed to survive the library revolution of the past seventy-five years. The second is the independent specialized research library created through the generosity of a well-to-do benefactor. Lastly, there is the rare book collection within a larger library.

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At the opening of the nineteenth century, all of America's thirty-odd libraries were privately supported and, to a large extent, privately patronized. Although these early collections were open to the public on some kind of terms, they were generally regarded as the private preserve of share holders or members of the societies who owned them. The men who ran these libraries were from the well-to-do classes, reluctant to expose their property to the rigors of indiscriminate public use. The collections reflected a readership well educated in the best eighteenth-century traditions. Many had been assembled by men of sound literary taste and judgment like Thomas Prince, James Logan, and Thomas Jefferson. Indeed, the traditional picture of the well rounded eighteenth-century gentleman can serve as a prototype for the American librarian at the turn of the century: a man of wide humanistic interests, aware of his curatorial responsibilities, and concerned with building his collections along sound and discriminating lines.

There is no occasion to recount the impact of the industrial revolution and the expansion of America on the balanced and self-contained way of life of which these early libraries were a part. The increase in book production, the expansion of the reading public due to education and the increase in leisure time, the increase in new forms of publications such as magazines and government publications, the disproportionate increase in publications in certain subject fields such as science, technology, and economics all placed an immense strain on both the physical capacities and the intellectual orientation of the eighteenth-century library geared for a homogenous clientele.

Between 1800 and 1875 an average of about forty-eight libraries a year were founded in this country.¹ The duplication, conflict, and confusion that often characterized these years is familiar to any student of library history. The resolution of this great problem took place during the last part of the nineteenth century with the beginning of the American library profession by a dedicated group of men and women. The creation of the free public library in its modern form, the founding of the *Library Journal*, the Library Bureau, and the American

Library Association in 1876 and the opening of the first school of Library Economy in 1887 by Melvil Dewey are but the most familiar parts of a whole series of developments and achievements. The essence of the missionary spirit of those early days has been expressed by H. W. Kent, a member of Dewey's first class in 1884. "What Dewey taught was not the love of books, either for their literary content or their physical properties, but how to administer a library and how to care for the needs of those who would know and use books. His adoption of the word 'Economy,' somewhat strange sounding at the time, expressed exactly what he had in mind—the administration of a library in a businesslike, efficient manner."²

Thus it was that the new profession, growing up in an era of pragmatism, chose "Service" as its watchword. The great flood of printed material that had been coming from the presses of the world, and which was to increase to then unimagined proportions, was organized and managed with vigor and determination. These men and women had to be hard-headed about books. Library procedures had to be worked out in terms of usefulness and reader demands. Classification, cataloging, binding, shelving, acquisition, and all other operations that go to make up the modern library had to be created in terms of what would be most effective for the growing masses of library users. Of the many tributes received by the American library profession for its achievements perhaps the most telling is the fact that institutions as old as the Vatican and as young as the library school at Ankara have come to it for advice, guidance, and training.

As in most reform movements that accomplish a great deal in a short time, the library revolution discarded much that was vital in the "old way." The great scholar-librarian, regarded as impractical and unrealistic, became a teacher and found his way into the newly re-oriented academic profession. The collector-librarian, regarded as a mere antiquarian accumulator who filled the library with little used and therefore useless material, fell into disrepute, and the librarian who knew his books, inside and out, as intimate friends, was characterized as a stooped old man wearing a green visor, an alpaca coat, and shuffling about among dusty and disordered shelves. Yet it is with these men that the modern rare book story begins. They kept the great humanistic library traditions of learning and scholarship moving forward and adapted them to the needs of the modern world. They were able to do this because there were books and collections which would not submit to the ruthless discipline imposed by the library profession. Some of the new techniques, such as the card catalog, were quickly

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adopted. Indeed, men and women trained in the new profession played an important part in the continued growth of those libraries which still operated under the old regime. However, the vigorous insistence of the new library profession on standards of efficiency, immediate usefulness, and quantitative measurement were out of place in the libraries that still relished the old traditions.

The most prominent group of libraries in which the older philosophy held sway were among the society and the subscription libraries. Historical societies like the American Antiquarian Society, the Massachusetts Historical Society, the New-York Historical Society, and the Historical Society of Pennsylvania all were devoted entirely, or to a large extent, to books and manuscripts in specialized fields. They, therefore, needed men who were primarily historians rather than professional librarians. In certain instances, privately endowed research libraries such as the Newberry and the more wealthy subscription libraries such as the Library Company of Philadelphia and the Boston Athenaeum, were able to pick and choose the elements of the new professional philosophy they wanted to put to use and they often retained scholars, collectors, and bibliophiles as their librarians.

The administrative officers of the great and growing research libraries also recognized that there were some books that could not be submitted to ordinary library routines. In 1899 the University of Michigan set up its own rare book room. Harvard, many years before the building of the Houghton Library, had its locked closets and later its Treasure Room with two floors and numerous rooms, while Yale was segregating its rarities as far back as the nineteenth century. Among the public libraries, the New York Public Library has long been preeminent as a place where books with special virtues would receive care from men with special bibliographical talents. The consolidation of the Lenox and Astor books in 1911 resulted in the creation of a number of special collections of outstanding importance, while the presence of Wilberforce Eames on the staff provided it with an aura that no other library in the country could quite match.

In 1904 there was injected into this picture an old element in a new guise. The collector of books has always been an intimate part of library growth. James Logan, Peter Force, James Lenox, J. B. Thacher, H. C. Lea and H. E. Widener are but a few of the book collectors that American libraries are proud to have as a part of their history. As early as 1845 John Carter Brown of Providence, Rhode Island, began assembling what was to become the greatest library of Americana in the United States. Through two generations of wise and

fastidious collecting the library grew to the point where scholars everywhere were becoming aware of its importance.³ Finally, in 1898, the family decided that the time had come to give the collection a permanent home. They built on the campus of Brown University the John Carter Brown Library, which opened in 1904. Established in its own building, it was completely independent of the main university library with its own committee of management and its own librarian. The agreement of gift included strict regulations about the care and the use of the books.

The founding of the John Carter Brown Library coincided with the peak of what has been called "The Golden Age of Book Collecting." During the latter half of the nineteenth century, American book collectors began assembling libraries on the scale of the Duke of Roxburgh and Sir Thomas Phillips. Aided by the break-up of many English and European libraries and an antiquarian book trade that contained such men as Henry Stevens, L. C. Harper, J. F. Drake and A. S. W. Rosenbach, bibliophiles like Beverly Chew, Brayton Ives, and Robert Hoe created world famous collections.⁴ Many of these collections were to be dispersed on the owner's death. However, a number of collectors found in the John Carter Brown pattern a more effective method of disposing of their books, and during the next three decades there followed the Annmary Brown Memorial Library in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1907, the Henry E. Huntington at San Marino, California in 1920, the William L. Clements at Michigan and Alfred Clark Chapin at Williams College in 1923, the Pierpont Morgan in New York City in 1924, the Folger in Washington, D.C., in 1932, and the William Andrews Clark at the University of California at Los Angeles in 1934. These institutions differed in a number of ways, yet all but two have some relationship to a college or university; only the Huntington is any substantial distance away from a larger research library. In the years since their founding these libraries have pursued various goals, but their outstanding collective characteristic has been that they have, in general, become important research centers in their own fields. Through programs of publication, encouragement of research, and participation in the world of scholarship they have made themselves a vital part of scholarship in this country.

There were many reasons for the popularity of this kind of library, but high on the list of reasons was a thoroughgoing distrust of the dehumanizing aspects of professional librarianship. In selecting their librarians and curators the benefactors usually consciously avoided the "professional librarian" and chose men and women who were

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sympathetic with the humanistic and bibliophilistic motives behind their collections. The late Belle daCosta Greene, Max Farrand, Randolph Adams, and J. Q. Adams were but a few of the people who were to join with men in older institutions to carry on the humanistic traditions of librarianship.

Between the two world wars these men and women began to raise their kind of librarianship to a new eminence. Standing between the library and scholarly professions they partook of a little of each. Having no professional organization of their own, they adopted the Bibliographical Society of America, which has become an association of bibliographers, rare book librarians, book collectors, antiquarian booksellers, and a few professional librarians with bibliographical interests. As librarians outside the profession they freely criticized it for its shortcomings. They stressed the failure to care properly for books, the concentration on service in terms of quantity rather than quality, the growing library bureaucracy with its committees and conferences, and the somewhat self-conscious preoccupation with professionalism.

This friendly warfare soon had its effect. In the 1930's some library schools began offering courses in "rare books." True, the emphasis was frequently on rarity rather than on the books, but it showed that the library profession recognized a valid criticism when it saw one. Then in the 1940's came the administrative changes mentioned earlier. In some cases, of course, the librarian felt compelled to apologize and to justify the creation of a "luxury." It is significant to note, however, that of the nineteen libraries which have created rare book collections, seven did so entirely as an administrative decision. In ten others a gift made possible an already existing administrative desire. Only two of the new collections came about solely as the result of a gift. The professional background of the men and women who have been put at the head of these new operations is also significant. Two-thirds have a professional library background including a library degree, although a number have some kind of scholarly or antiquarian book training in addition. It should be noted, however, that major eastern institutions such as Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Columbia, and Virginia, and one west of the Alleghenies, Indiana, have heads who came to rare book librarianship from backgrounds of research, bibliography, or the antiquarian book trade.

Today, many libraries are fully prepared, both administratively and intellectually, to receive great gifts of rare books. The potential donor now has little difficulty finding a congenial home for his collection, although he must still assure himself of the state of affairs in the

library he is seeking to enrich.⁵ The need for restrictions which helped motivate the completely independent library of the 1900's, 1920's and 1930's is declining. Not only do the large research libraries understand about rare books but their vast collections have become necessary in making a collection of rare books fully effective.

What then is the future of rare book librarianship? In the case of many newly created collections it is too early to tell, but some of the achievements of older rare book libraries and collections are suggestive. The work of the Houghton, the Brown, the Clements, the Folger, the Huntington, and the Newberry libraries in stimulating research in their collections have made them an integral part of the world of scholarship. The various editorial projects being carried out at Princeton and Yale show how scholars can be brought into a library's operations. The library quarterlies and books published by libraries show the direct contributions libraries can make to scholarship. Both the rare book collection and the rare book librarian have played vital roles in these developments.

These successful rare book librarians rarely conform to the traditional library administrative patterns. In addition to their tasks as curators and collectors they have an important responsibility for making the library a more active part of the world of the humanities. The relation of the curator to his job should have some of the flavor of a faculty member's relation to his teaching. He should have both the time and the opportunity to participate in the world of research and scholarship. Those who like to separate human activity into compartments will argue that the scholar and the librarian perform different functions and should not interfere in each other's work. Some of the extreme results of this attitude are familiar. University librarians have been confronted with a departmental decision to include a new area of study without any real investigation of the library's holdings or its ability to build collections in the new area.

Faculty members, on the other hand, find their work hampered by the librarian's close attention to his rules and regulations. There are many examples of both the extra efforts librarians have made to meet unusual faculty requirements, and the faculty members who have gone out of their way to know their library and to grasp the full complexity of its operation. But in a larger sense the dichotomy between librarians and scholars is one of the unfortunate facts of American librarianship. This is particularly true of university libraries where the faculty, which exerts a substantial influence in the selection of the librarian, still feels that the library profession is not a dependable source for men to hold

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their top library posts. Of the six university libraries of over two million volumes, three are headed by men with no library science degrees and two of these came to their jobs with no previous library experience. Indeed, of the five men appointed since July 1, 1955, to head libraries included in the Princeton statistics,⁶ four are without library degrees and three without previous experience.

There are many reasons for this state of affairs but one of the most prominent is the feeling that the professional librarian stands outside the humanistic tradition. Among the librarians who can help remove this feeling are those men and women who have made it part of their business to carry on the humanistic library traditions of the past. Much has already been done. The recent appointment of a rare book librarian to head a major university library is, we can hope, another sign that as the gap has been narrowed between the "professional librarian" with his modern "know-how" and the rare book man with his library traditions so will the larger gap be narrowed between the world of librarianship and the world of scholarship.

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